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“Pathways for developing a ‘Smart’ workforce: does the achievement of formal workplace qualifications encourage participation in Higher Education?”

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Panel 5: Bridging the Gap: academic, policy and practitioner engagement and interdependency.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate a public workforce education initiative in the context of State and agency policies designed to enhance employee capabilities to adapt to a volatile and changing environment. In particular, we are concerned with public employees' experience of a higher educational pathway that resulted in their obtaining a Diploma level qualification. In addition to understanding the employees' experience of this pathway we were interested in whether the experience contributed to their openness to the prospect of university level education. We conducted telephone interviews with a sample of participants from the program. Employees reported very positive experience of the program; in particular employees reported enhanced efficacy beliefs, a strong sense of achievement, and a feeling of recognition. This experience is explained by four main factors; (1) a program design that was well aligned with the employees learning needs, (2) strong support by organisational staff who delivered and assessed participants on capability criteria, (3) strong management support for employees' participation, (4) an academic ceremony that provided participants with public recognition of their achievement by valued others. Participants' motivation to participate was primarily intrinsic rather than extrinsic. Participants in the study reported that their experience in this educational pathway gave them the confidence to consider the possibility of university level education. The paper also discusses the practitioner-academic collaboration that led to the development of this paper.

Key words: workforce education; higher education

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation, the development of new technologies and greater community engagement in public service delivery are creating fundamental change in the public sector (Osborne and Brown, 2005). If government organisations are to adapt to this changing and volatile environment, there will be a need to invest in developing a smart and well educated workforce (Lester and Costley, 2010). Public employees with new and different capabilities and in greater numbers will be required to meet the demands of the jobs of the future (Beaver and Hutchings, 2005; Allegrante, Moon, Auld and Gebbie, 2001; Chubin, May and Babco, 2005). In this context, organisations will depend on employees who are highly motivated to pursue development and educational opportunities, including higher education, to keep pace with changes impacting on their organisations. In particular, there is a need for employees to choose to invest effort into gaining educational credentials that may involve some cost to their personal and family time.

The task is a challenging one. In many traditional role environments, entry into lower-level public sector roles does not require formal qualifications. Producing the necessary shifts in workforce capability will require creative investment in workforce education and training, the development of policy supportive of organisational and employee engagement in workforce education and the development of a complex network of relationships among policy makers, practitioners, educators and researchers. Single-dimension solutions such as "bringing in more migrants" or "employing the unemployed" are not the answer. The answer lies in a targeted approach to managing and developing the workforce as well as in sensitive policy development (Salt, 2011). The core question facing policy makers and practitioners is how to create a smart workforce that simultaneously meets the organisation's service delivery needs in increasingly volatile context and simultaneously contributes to wider policy goals related to community education.

The literature on workforce education is growing and diverse (Hawley, Sommers et al, 2005). The issue of workforce education is a multi-level and multi-dimensional one; there are multiple stakeholders involved and workforce educational outcomes are more likely if there is some appropriate level of alignment among the policies and practices of these various stakeholders. For example, we expect that workforce educational outcomes are more likely if (1) employees are motivated to pursue

educational opportunities, (2) sectors have policies and practices that reinforce investments in workforce education, (3) sectors have policies and practices for capability and workforce development pathways at both the level of strategic human resource management (Beaver and Hutchings, 2005) as well as at the operational and line management level where support for implementation of policy resides, (4) agencies have organisational units to manage the provision of internal educational services and liaise with external providers, (5) educational service providers devise programs driven by appropriate pedagogical philosophies that make the programs relevant and accessible to potential participants (Murphy and Calway, 2008), and (6) researchers in collaboration with their practitioner colleagues produce useful knowledge that informs decisions by practitioners in the field of workforce education (e.g. Sobiechowska and Maisch, 2007).

Any consideration of public workforce education initiatives is likely to require consideration of all of these perspectives. Each perspective raises unique issues that warrant particular focus; however, for the most part these conditions are rarely met. Often there is little alignment between organisation's human resource management systems and employee engagement in and motivation towards engagement in pursuing higher education. Consequently, employee decisions to engage in educational pathways are not driven by reward or pay incentives. Moreover, relationships with learning and development practitioners across the public sector and HE sector are not widely established. Under these conditions developing educational pathways that employees choose to engage with is problematic.

One perspective on the issue of workforce education that has been given less attention in the literature and is critical to the successful attainment of organisational outcomes is the assessment of the efficacy of educational pathways, particularly from the perspective of the individual employee. Ultimately individual employees choose or do not choose to engage in educational opportunities that have benefit for both their employing agency and for them personally and professionally. Achieving workforce education outcomes relies on devising appropriate pathways that provide employees with the motivation and access to ongoing educational opportunities: pathways that build on pre-existing knowledge relevant to organisational outcomes, and support lifelong learning (Candy, 1991). Frequently the pathways to developing a qualified capable and engaged workforce are known and their efficacy as a means of engaging employees in further education is less well known.

The purpose of this research is two-fold. First, the study investigates the efficacy of an educational pathway that involves the achievement of workplace qualifications through participation in higher vocational education. Our focus is primarily on the experience of HE-naïve employee-learners (that is, employees who have no prior experience of higher education); what describes their experience and whether their experience increases their desire for participation in university level courses. Specifically, the research addresses the issue of whether in-house accreditations encourage employees to pursue higher education. The second purpose of the study is to provide a reflection on the development of context-sensitive process models to support practice- research collaboration that led to the development of this paper.

The paper contributes to the literature on workforce education in three main ways. First, the paper outlines a successful educational pathway for HE-naïve employees into higher vocational education with the prospect of advancing to university level education. Second, the paper provides a discussion of the motivations that led to collaboration between the first author, a successful practitioner who was instrumental to the development of the workforce education pathway and a University academic. Third, the paper presents a case study that illustrates the experience of HE-naïve employee-learners.

CONTEXT

Workforce education and development have important economic, industry and organisational performance benefits (Meier, 2009; Burke, 1995), and important individual and social benefits (Kim, 2002). For example, effective workforce educational pathways provide (a) organizational support for the career development of an individual within an agency, often the first tertiary qualification received after many years in the workforce (b) recognition of an individual's work place contribution (c) economic advantage to increase workforce employability (d) adding public value through providing improved service delivery to the community.

Moreover, higher levels of educational attainment result in higher labour force participation rates and longer participation in the workforce. A better educated workforce is also important in achieving productivity improvements (Allen, 2010). The investment in workforce education and the development of pathways for employees to pursue HE programs is likely to increase.

In this section of the paper we consider the elements of a workforce education pathway to higher education that underpinned this study. In particular, we draw on prior theory and research to consider those factors in the learner and in the situation that might influence learner outcomes in the context of the pathway from no formal qualifications to diploma level education.

The learner

The success of workforce education pathways to higher education requires the active cooperation of employees. Ultimately if a workforce education strategy is to be effective, employees must make the decision to pursue opportunities for higher education. Frequently, it is much easier to see workforce education from the employers' perspective, not the employees'. Employers might see the prospect of capability development, the resolution of skills gaps and the importance of learning and life-long learning (Candy, 1991) and so on.

Employees on the other hand may see potential benefit and various barriers to participation in their participation in pathways to higher education (McGivney, 1993). McGivney (1993) identified three potential barriers to participation in learning activities; (situational barriers (e.g. time and cost), institutional barriers (e.g. misaligned programs, processes and teaching and learning strategies) and (3) dispositional barriers (e.g. negative perceptions of learning and own capacity for achievement).

The decision to pursue higher education can involve significant investments of time and effort. Employees must believe they possess the intellectual capacity to succeed in higher education, have sufficient levels of confidence in their ability to succeed and have high motivation to pursue a multi-year education program and they must believe there is a supportive family and work context. Moreover, they must believe that successfully completing an accredited higher degree will provide valued outcomes both personally and professionally in terms of their career in the public sector.

Yet, most lower-level public sector administrative roles in Queensland Australia do not have mandatory qualifications, therefore entry level to the Public Sector does not align with the notion of improving one's learning and development. Consequently, the need or motivation for HE in the sector is not driven by reward or pay incentives. In

this respect, employee-learner begins from quite different starting points. Most of the existing research on workforce education focuses on semi-professional employees such as social workers and nurses (e.g. Clinton and Robinson et al, 2004). These groups are likely to start the process with some prior educational experience and are more likely to see a link between achievement of a qualification and extrinsic reward outcomes. They are able to start their public service career as a graduate and enter the Professional Officer (PO) industrial award at a pay rate that is higher and recognises their degree qualification.

In summary, the participants considered in this paper have no or little prior higher education experience and attainment of the qualification does not affect their financial rewards. The employer sees benefit in their development and the opportunity to participate in pathways to higher education.

Work-family balance

The issue of work/life balance is increasingly important in work organisations (Maxwell and McDougall, 2004) particularly as organisations operating in volatile and changing environment typically demand more, not less of their employees' time. Pursuing higher degrees is likely to impact on work-family balance and increase the likelihood of work – family conflicts as the employee seeks to meet the needs of family and social networks, work, and study (Bradley, McDonald and Brown, 2010). The decision to pursue higher education requires the support of family members and potentially extended family.

Supportive public policy context

The decision by employees to pursue tertiary education and by their public (and private) organisations to invest in developing pathways to tertiary education is likely to be reinforced by an explicit and supportive public policy context. This policy context provides both symbolic acknowledgement of the importance of workforce education and increases the likelihood that agencies will invest resources in realising policy outcomes.

For many governments, the issue of workforce education and development is made particularly salient by the imperative of economic development in a context of greater volatility and greater competition on a global scale (Boin and Christensen, 2008).

Forward thinking Governments seek to influence change at industry, organisation and occupational role level to facilitate the development of more and better pathways to a higher education for both employees and school leavers.

Successful achievement of this role results in

- (1) organisational support of career development for the individual and for the agency, often the first tertiary qualification received after many years in the workforce,
- (2) recognition of individual's work place contribution,
- (3) economic advantage to Smart State policy initiative, and
- (4) adding public value through providing an improved service delivery approach.

In Queensland, one State of Australia, the initiative is undertaken in the context of training and qualifications targets of the State government. In particular, the Government's Smart State policy indicates that:

We need to skill Queenslanders for the jobs of tomorrow. Rapid technological change and a competitive global market are placing a high premium on a skilled workforce for the future. Increasing access to education and training programs and services helps us to adapt to the growing skills demand within Queensland.

The target is that three out of four Queenslanders will hold trade, training or tertiary qualifications. Currently, 54.1% of Queenslanders hold Certificate III or higher qualifications. Several strategies are employed to realise this target including, boosting industry investment and ownership in skilling, widening access to tertiary education and improving pathways to qualification. In the context of widening access to tertiary education, the Government has (1) initiated the 2010-2015 User Choice Program which provides an opportunity for employers to access education and training service providers and (2) enrolled almost 50,000 Queenslanders in VET under the Productivity Places Program to raise the skill level of both job seekers and existing workers to meet industry needs.

Supportive organisational context

There has been an increasing focus on developing pathways to higher education for employees to support workforce education. In the UK there has been some focus on foundation degrees and work-based qualifications designed to expand higher education and address key skills shortages (Greenbank, 2010; Edmond, Hillier and Price, 2007). Moreover, HE institutions have engaged in various types of program aimed at workforce education. For example, Corporate Education Programs in which organisations negotiate with a University provider(s), work-based education and work integrated learning and Recognition of formal workplace learning

The decision to pursue higher education is likely to be reinforced by supportive organisational policies and managerial support. In 2007 the case organisation established a learning and development unit of two (2) staff to support the development of skills and knowledge of employees in undertaking their role and ensure consistency of practice across 17 regional office areas.

The first author is a practitioner responsible for responding to this policy driver. The following approach has been implemented for internal staff so that they are better able to respond in volatile times to the changing landscape of workforce needs:

- (1) internal assessment of skills of staff,
- (2) design, development and delivery of an internal training program to meet current skill requirements of positions,
- (3) alignment of skill set to qualifications pathway,
- (4) cross agency and national linkages to other agencies and higher education providers,
- (5) recognition of capabilities and higher education assessment methodology implemented, and
- (6) issue and award of a qualification.

As a part of a workforce education strategy, the organisation entered into a partnership co-provider agreement with a registered provider and provides in-house

development opportunities for these employees. On successful completion of these in house programs and time working in the field the participants submit a portfolio of evidence based on their daily work, the participants are assessed and if competent they are awarded a nationally recognised qualification. These accreditations have been very well received by employees and may well be a source of encouragement for pursuing further study in tertiary education. However, at this point there are few data.

Developing appropriate HE pathways involves at least five factors. First, public organisations need to use increasingly sophisticated workforce planning systems to identify education needs within a changing and often uncertain context. Second, there is a need to identify education pathways that meet workforce education needs. Third, there is a need to use performance management systems to monitor and evaluate the efficacy of educational pathways (Pestieau, 2009; Newcomer, 2007). Fourth, it is increasingly clear that successful outcomes require the development of collaborative partnerships among stakeholders affected by the implementation of workforce education policies (Dutton, 2005), collaborative partnerships that frequently require some adaptation by those stakeholders. Fifth, there is a need to find ways of engaging the workforce to participate in educational and training opportunities; to adopt a life-long learning orientation (Ryan and Sinning, 2009).

Most public organisations make significant investments in internal employee development at all organisational levels and all functions. Public organisations also engage external consulting and training services to provide programs deemed relevant. Some public organisations also facilitate employee pathways to accredited and non-accredited (Corporate education) programs. For example, one large agency in Queensland negotiated an accredited Graduate Certificate in Public Management to enhance both individual and agency goals.

Pathways to higher education must be supported by top level managers and this support is reflected in the development of strategic workforce capability systems that increase the likelihood that organisations will realise the benefits of increased participation in higher education. Line managers must also support the HE pathway. Line managers must be willing to support employees who seek access to higher education programs and in particular be willing to accept some short term costs associated with this participation.

In the Queensland context, relationships with Learning and Development practitioners across the Public Sector and the HE sector are not widely established. Moreover, HE programs have been subject to some criticism (Lee, McGuiggan and Holland, 2010). In particular, it has been argued that traditional teaching pedagogies are too prescriptive, dated and inaccessible to some students and use inappropriate assessment criteria (Johnson, 2006).

However, a project was undertaken to align tasks, functions and skills requirements with a VET qualification. A Diploma level program was aligned to the duties and functions and learning materials, assessment tasks and a mapping process was undertaken. A relationship with a VET provider was developed for administrative functions only so that all learning and development was conducted on the job. Staff from the unit marketed, delivered, assessed and motivated staff for 100% uptake. Table 1 provides an overview of the program negotiated with the VET provider.

Table 1: Model Undertaken:

Time	Content
Week 1	In house facilitated face to face learning of role, functions, legislative requirements, training in the technical components of new role.
Week 2 - 6	Working in the field in the regional office undertaking duties under supervision.
Week 7	In house face to face learning. More in depth functions of the role, case studies, simulations, sharing of learning, observations from the field.
Week 8 - 11	Field / office work relating to the role
Week 12	In house facilitated face to face learning, ongoing development, communication models, ideas sharing, introduction to the Diploma qualification pathway, methodology and support available.
6 months	Field work in role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gathering evidence against the criteria from workplace experiences accompanied by critical commentaries as appropriate. - Developing a portfolio of evidence - Support and visits from learning and development staff. - Submission of recognition of prior Learning portfolio for Assessment.
	Graduation and Celebration for 126 participants

Research questions

We address two questions in this research:

1. What factors contributed to participants' experience of the pathway to higher education? and
2. Did their experience contribute to openness to the prospect of a further pathway to university level courses?

METHOD

The context of the research is a State government agency in Australia that has implemented a policy that addresses the need to skill their population for the jobs of tomorrow. Skills Queensland has been established to align the Queensland skills system with the needs of employers, individuals, industry, and the community to alleviate skills shortages and better position Queensland to address futures skills needs. The Queensland Post Secondary Education and Training Review report recommends improvements in participation in tertiary education and training by all Queenslanders and strengthened partnerships between public and private training and higher education providers and industry to build workforce skills. In response to these recommendations the Queensland Government has adopted measures to support improved pathways between VET and higher education, coordinate networks of post-secondary institutions, and consider structural proposals.

The research focuses on a particular job category and providing incentives for members of this job category to pursue higher education. Members of this job category operate as boundary spanners. Traditionally their role has been regulatory in nature; ensuring that employers meet standards for development of a particular employee group. Recently, there have been role shifts in this group. Rather than a regulatory role they have shifted to a more consultative role. Consequently, members of this job category play an important role in wider workforce education.

One hundred and twenty six employees (126) participated in the program. In this phase of the research we focus on the reactions of a small sample of 15 employees. The next phase of the research will widen the scope. The sampling strategy was purposive and focused on diversity in terms of age, location. The work role of the

cohort involves their working with stakeholders to improve outcomes of attraction, retention and completion of apprentices and trainees. Originally the role was primarily a regulatory one; to ensure that industry meets standards with respect to the development of a particular group of employees. More recently their role has been redesigned to incorporate a greater focus on consultation, rather than a purely regulatory one. Entry into this role did not require formal qualifications however as part of the future development of these employees it is considered that participation in formal accredited education programs would be beneficial.

Internal courses to prepare these employees for their role have been designed and delivered. Participation in these programs has been recognised by a nationally recognised qualification. This recognition was received very positively by participants.

Data collection strategy

The participants in the study are dispersed across a large Australian state, making face-to-face interviews impossible. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Participants in the study were provided with the questions prior to a telephone interview.

A semi-structured interview was designed to capture employees experience of

1. What were the things that most helped you engage in this learning opportunity?
2. What impact did receiving this qualification have for you personally, your work life, and your home/family?
3. What were the best things about getting this qualification?
4. Were there any barriers you faced in completing this qualification?
5. How open would you be to undertake university education opportunities?
6. What areas of study would you be interested in undertaking?

RESULTS

A thematic analysis of employees' responses was undertaken.

Theme i: aligning and embedding educational experience within operational work demands enhanced participants educational experience

Participants responded well to an educational experience that had assessment embedded in their everyday work experience. Not only did this embedding make their experience more meaningful, it also provided them with access to supportive relationships with colleagues. Staff were able to undertake their daily work and ultimately realise that their efforts related to elements within the assessment criteria that was required. This realisation enabled them to evaluate their tasks and find relevance in their work. The initial face to face development program embedded their educational experience into their daily activities and from here staff were able to make the transition into understanding the qualification pathway.

Participant responses included:

I found it beneficial that my peers were also undertaking this learning opportunity.

The provision of training through work meant there was no cost.

I am now a lot more confident to talk to work clients about studying and not to be fearful. I encourage them to have a go and am preaching how good it is now.

The things that helped me most was the group environment. After group discussions, being able to take that information and apply it to assignments

Theme ii: investing in building employee self efficacy enhances employees' experience of the learning experience

Participating in higher education involves numerous challenges for the learner. Not only do learners need to develop the learning skills required to succeed they also need to develop relatively high self efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capacity to achieve some task, including overcoming obstacles and barriers (Bandura, 1997). As indicated earlier, the participants in this study had no prior higher educational experience and initially found the prospect daunting.

Ongoing support was provided to de-mystify the daunting and overwhelming task of competencies, gathering evidence and removing barriers. Candy's (1991) view that espousing a self-directed learning method does not necessarily result in learning

being self directed was evidenced here and staff needed encouragement, time allocated and motivation to complete their units.

Participant responses included:

Increased self esteem and confidence through achievement and recognition for the years of experience and skills gained along the way Not just a mum but a brain behind the motherly activity. Happiness seeing the pride the family displays.

I achieved a long term goal of obtaining a qualification and participating in a graduation. This has resulted in an increase in my own self esteem and value. It has set a good example for my children.

My greatest barrier was myself. Fear of failing as I completed Year 12 and never planned of going to University. It has been 25 years since school finished, I doubted myself.

As I have no previous qualifications it reinforced a belief in self and ignited a desire to gain further qualifications

Personally and professionally it gave a sense of accomplishment and the confidence in knowing that I have the skills to undertake my job in the Public Service. My family were also proud of the accomplishment.

It was a lot easier than I thought.

The impact that occurred after receiving this qualification was personal self awareness and confidence in me and my abilities. I also experienced pride and encouragement and realised that other family members should acknowledge their skills and abilities at work more.

I am not a person with a lot of confidence in my own ability. The guidance and support identified that my skills and abilities are at this level of qualification.

There was an initial expectation by the Learning and Development unit that “if we provided the opportunity they would take advantage of it”. This was not the case as staff were reluctant to begin for fear of “getting it wrong”, or overwhelmed by the jargon used in the unit descriptors. Staff were unsure as to how they would be able to achieve a qualification through a work based learning experience. There was a

negative response by some office staff relating to the validity of the Diploma as in earlier times this qualification would be three years of full time study and some older staff were disbelieving that a Diploma could be achieved in the work environment. There was also concern expressed as to how the workplace could provide sufficient evidence to meet competency requirements and this supports Brookfield's (cited in Doyle (2005) thought that it is a myth that individuals are able to abstract out and articulate their learning from everyday routines of practice, and/or projects.

The learning and development team worked to develop a high level of trust, relationship and understanding between the staff that were enrolled in the program. This eased the way for staff to express their fears, ask questions and have the process demystified. The unit staff travelled to every regional office and met with staff to walk them through the portfolio requirements, giving examples of the type of evidence required and this was time consuming and maybe prohibitive in a larger setting.

Participant responses included:

When I was told we had the opportunity to complete the Diploma in Government, I was excited yet hesitant as I did not feel that I had the skills to complete a Diploma. However support from the trainer's assisted me realising I had the skills and can achieve the qualification.

Finding the information to provide for the qualification was a barrier at first.

The support we received removed the barriers that I had.

The guidance received during the completion of the study was great.

Theme iii: engagement of employer in design delivery and assessment of the program enhanced employee engagement in learning, however with a cost.

The learning and development unit created an agreement with the qualification provider to deliver, assess and support the "students" throughout the whole learning process. This was time consuming however had a very high completion rate due to the nature of the design. Staff were introduced to the concept over a period of three months so that their learning was gradual and relationships were built with each individual. The workplace was also supportive of the learning activity and this enhanced the opportunity for staff to complete their assessment portfolios.

Theme iv: ceremony plays an important role in enhancing participants' educational experience

The graduation ceremony had an important influence on participants' reaction to achieving the Diploma. Participants dressed in academic regalia and were presented with their Diploma at a formal ceremony. The function of ceremony for people is sometimes underestimated. Social information processing is an important way that individuals acquire beliefs about themselves and their role in the organisation (Thomas and Griffin, 1989). Ceremony provides people with sources of social information.

Participant responses included:

My perception of the value of achieving the qualification changed dramatically and I was quite taken back at our graduation. I was disappointed that I did not realise the value of this achievement prior to the graduation because I would have invited my family members along to share in this occasion

My family and I were very proud of the achievement. Most especially the ceremony itself where my daughter came along to see me receive the diploma

Theme v: success experiences foster greater investment in further education

The successful experience and completion of a qualification has opened the door for some staff that had never experienced any formal study since leaving school. Themes emerging from those interviewed indicated that the idea was a possibility but the process was unknown territory. The pathway from a TAFE setting to University was very wide and the method as to how to bridge this gap was a mystery to the cohort.

Would you be open to undertaking a University education opportunity?

Participant responses included:

Being a full time working mother is a barrier in terms of time but now that I have completed the Diploma it is in the possibly can do category. Even more than likely now after completing the Diploma. I would like to pursue HR or Management.

I am open to it and looking into it – if I hadn't done the Diploma I wouldn't even have thought of considering further study.

The idea of doing more study scares me – the pressure I put on myself to achieve high results would be too much.

It has opened up a whole new world of opportunities that might be available.

Don't wait 25 years!!!

Theme vi: supportive and facilitative management facilitates improved learning opportunity.

Participant responses included:

Management of the work unit was very supportive and allowed set periods of time to complete assignments. Qualification achievements were listed in personal development plans and management prioritised the completion of this learning.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to identify those factors that explained employee motivational outcomes associated with participation in a pathway to higher education. The employees in this study had no formal prior qualifications and there was little prospect that successful attainment of the HE qualification would benefit them in terms of remuneration and advancement.

Despite these constraints, the evidence suggests that the educational pathway was very successful. Employees reported high levels of satisfaction with the program. In particular, they experienced a sense of achievement and enhanced sense of their own self efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Eccles and Wigfield, 2002) and a feeling of being recognised by their family and also being recognised by the organisation for their prior organisational experience and contribution. Surprisingly, there was little reference to the lack of formal extrinsic rewards associated with successful attainment of the qualification. The motivators in this case were intrinsic rather than extrinsic (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). Theories of job design have traditionally predicted this outcome (Oldham and Hackman, 1981; Herzberg, 1968).

Why was this model successful and what are the implications for enhancing employee engagement in HE pathways? The model provided a flexible, supportive individualised pathway to professional and academic achievement that could be delivered in a demystified manner within the workplace environment. We explain the outcomes in terms of three factors, (1) learner engagement strategies, (2) situational support strategies, and (3) relationship with HE provider.

Learner-oriented engagement strategies

For learners the data suggest self efficacy (I can do it) and self worth (personal and family recognition) were important outcomes. Several strategies reduced the effect of dispositional barriers (McGivney, 1993) to participation and engagement in the program. First, tutor mediated learning based on workplace knowledge and experience grounded employee learning. New knowledge was built on rather than separate from prior knowledge. This idea is well established in the experiential learning tradition (e.g. Wolfe and Kolb, 1984) though not always well reflected in higher education programs.

Second, program delivery staff members were able to provide practical demonstration to staff of the “value” of their work against formal qualifications. Initially, staff did not have a construct of their workplace as a learning environment. Program delivery staff members were able to help participants see that learning can occur in a range of inter-related ways. Third, program delivery staff involved built one-on-one relationships with all participants in the initial learning and development experience. These relationships were an important means of identifying and removing those barriers that led employees to question their ability to succeed.

Finally, staff who delivered the program provided ongoing support to de-mystify the daunting and overwhelming task of competencies, gathering evidence and removing barriers. Candy’s (1991) view that self directed methodology does not necessarily result in the learner being self directed was evidenced here and staff needed encouragement, time allocated and motivation to complete their units.

Situational support

Situation support was also critical to program success. Barriers to success were well managed. With management support, learning and assessment time were built into

the workday, thus reducing impact on work/life balance and family relationships in particular.

Links with HE providers

The links with HE providers also played an important role in contributing to employees motivational outcomes. First, an organisationally-relevant program was designed in collaboration with the HE provider. The program was built on well understood and well validated approaches to recognition of both prior and informal learning. The relationship with the provider and internal learning and development staff was well established.

Despite the success of this program, however, there is still much to be done to establish and maintain relationships with L&D partitioners across the public sector, VET and Higher Education providers. Relationships with the VET/HE sector in a work based learning environment need to be forged with the Learning and development sector of the public sector so they can build a bridge and protect the potential student from the overwhelming burden and red tape of collaborative partnerships.

Waterhouse (2002) The University offer: it is not that they can teach, nor even that they can sell research, but that they can assess: they accredit learning and are awarding bodies. It is this social certification of successful learning that individuals, employers and ultimately society pay for.” The next reinvention of the sector is contemporary vocationalisation and responsiveness to the economic imperatives rather than learning.

The collaboration

We end our discussion with a reflection on the collaboration that led to the development of this paper. Various types of engagement exist between public organisations and universities. Often the engagement involves request from the university for funds to engage in research of relevance to the organisation. This might be referred to as top-down engagement. In our case the collaboration emanated from ‘grass roots’ contact. The authors met at a professional development function organised by a public management association. The first author is responsible for developing and implementing educational pathways for staff. She has six main aims:

1. Research to support staff to be better equipped to work with stakeholders and engage in learning and development activities to support newly emerging roles
2. Further knowledge and skills to enhance delivery of the Department's educational programs and services that align with the future skill needs of staff
3. Provide a link for staff to higher education pathways as a result of an initial vocational educational outcome success
4. Directly contribute to the Q2 target (a State government target) of one in three Queenslanders having a Cert. III or higher qualification
5. Address innovative ways that staff can gain the confidence to undertake formal education and connect with the higher education sector
6. Provide the sector with acquired knowledge and skills that have been gained from following Public Management research and international practice.

The second author has an interest in real world research designed ultimately to serve the interests of both the organisation and the interests of a wider academic audience. For this author the main issue is sensemaking; gaining sufficient insight into the research problem and being able to determine conceptual frameworks and research strategies that can contribute to the organisation's workforce educational goals.

In many respects the 'grassroots' collaboration aided this process. It seems extremely doubtful that a top-down approach would have helped in this case. We are in the process of reciprocal sensemaking and sensegiving.

CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed a successful case of workforce education in which employees undertook a work-based education program that resulted in a Diploma of Government, a program tailored to organisational needs. The program and particularly the experience of successfully completing the program have provided participants with an incentive to pursue university level education. The program highlighted that employees are not always motivated by formal extrinsic rewards. Informal and intrinsic rewards also play a significant part in motivating employees at least in the context of workforce education.

The study is a first step study in our collaboration and we acknowledge the limitations of the study. For example, the sample size is small yet we have been able to gain insight into the motivational outcomes of successful attainment of the qualification. We note directions for future research. First, we see value in research that provides more insight into those dispositional and situational factors that reinforce and inhibit participation in higher education pathways. A smart and well educated workforce will be essential to meet the fundamental changes occurring in the public sector. The more we know about how employees respond to pathways to higher education the better.

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